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STATE FOR NEA, NEA/IPA, NEA/PPD

WHITE HOUSE FOR PRESS OFFICE, SIT ROOM
NSC FOR NEA STAFF

SECDEF WASHDC FOR USDP/ASD-PA/ASD-ISA
HQ USAF FOR XOXO
DA WASHDC FOR SASA
JOINT STAFF WASHDC FOR PA
CDR USCENTCOM MACDILL AFB FL FOR POLAD/USIA ADVISOR
COMSOCEUR VAIHINGEN GE FOR PAO/POLAD
COMSIXTHFLT FOR 019

JERUSALEM ALSO ICD
LONDON ALSO FOR HKANONA AND POL
PARIS ALSO FOR POL
ROME FOR MFO

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SUBJECT: ISRAEL MEDIA REACTION

SUBJECTS COVERED IN THIS REPORT:

Imad Mugniyah's Assassination

Key stories in the media:

All Israeli media led with the assassination of Hizballah military leader Imad Mugniyah on Tuesday night in Damascus. The Israeli Prime Minister's Office has issued a denial of involvement in the assassination; however Syria, Hizballah and Iran have publicly

blamed Israel for Mughnayih's death. Syria stated that the assassination was an "act of terror" and Iran said that "it is a further example of terror carried out by the Zionist regime." In Israel, the assassination has been praised by key Israeli public figures and in Ha'aretz's analysis, the event will give a boost to PM Olmert and Defense Minister Ehud Barak, who will give a nod and a wink, even in the off chance that Israel wasn't involved. All media reported that posts along Israel's northern border and diplomatic representations abroad have been put on alert for possible retaliatory strikes by Hezbollah. Israel Radio, citing another theory, suggested that the assassination may have been carried out by Lebanese Christians to mark the third anniversary of the assassination of former Lebanese PM Rafiq Hariri. Leading media also carried State Department Spokesman Sean McCormack statement that "The world is a better place without this man in it. He was a cold-blooded killer, a mass murderer, and a terrorist responsible for countless innocent lives lost."

The Jerusalem Post reported that PM Olmert told Shas leader Eli Yishai that Jerusalem would not be discussed until the end of the peace negotiations and that he will make sure that FM Tzipi Livni follows that directive. The Jerusalem Post also reported that Olmert promised Yishai that construction would continue in Jewish neighborhoods in east Jerusalem. Ha'aretz quoted Nir Barkat, the head of the opposition in Jerusalem's Municipality, as saying that Vice PM Haim Ramon and PA adviser Muhammad Rashid have agreed in a secret talks to a division of Jerusalem. The Jerusalem Post quoted

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Vice PM Haim Ramon as saying that Barkat's claims of talks are "absurd and unfounded."

The media reported that on Wednesday FM Tzipi Livni took 70 foreign diplomats on a tour of Sderot and the area. Ha'aretz quoted Livni as saying during the tour that Israel has rejected a proposal by PA Chairman [President] Mahmoud Abbas and PM Salam Fayyad to let the PA take responsibility for crossings between Gaza and Israel.

Israel Radio reported that at a Jewish community event in Paris on Wednesday, French President Nicolas Sarkozy vowed to secure the release of Gilad Shalit. Yediot reported that Sarkozy, who announced he will visit Israel in May, stressed the importance of celebrating Israel's 60th anniversary. The radio reported that the ambassadors to France of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Tunisia, and Mauritania, as well as the PLO representative in Paris, attended the dinner.

Ha'aretz reported that at a conference in Jerusalem on Wednesday military experts presented alternatives to Israel's permanent roadblocks in the West Bank, suggesting instead surprise checkpoints, PA-coordinated patrols, and more fences around Israeli settlements. The experts were quoted as saying that the current policy harms both the Palestinian population as well as the IDF.

Leading media described the interests in Israel of Badri Patarkatsishvili, an exiled Jewish Georgian tycoon and opposition politician, who died unexpectedly in suspicious circumstances on Tuesday night at his home outside London. This morning Israel Radio reported that the British police now believe that he died of natural causes.

Kosovar PM Hashim Thaci, the "Ben Gurion of Kosovo," was quoted as saying in an interview with Ha'aretz that his country will be a model of secularism. He called on Israel to join the bloc of democratic countries recognizing Kosovo's independence.

Imad Mughnayih's Assassination:

Summary:

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote on page one of the independent, left-leaning Ha'aretz: "If the Mughnayih assassination generates a mass outbreak in Lebanon, it might develop into a new civil war and create a tough front for Israel."

Washington correspondent Shmuel Rosner wrote in *Ha'aretz*: "the fact that Mugniyah was killed on Syrian soil will go on the growing list of American charges against Syria."

Liberal columnist Ofer Shelach wrote on page one of the popular, pluralist *Maariv*: "Such an operation, to which Israel denies any connection, renews the sense that we have daring and resourceful organizations that can go any place and reach anyone.... But the way we see everything as an ongoing attack ... attest[s] to an Israeli mentality that is often no less dangerous."

Eytan Haber, veteran op-ed writer and assistant to the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, wrote on page one of the mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot*: "The Hizbullah organization has the habit of always saying the 'last word,' even when its leaders know they will take in more and more blows."

The nationalist, Orthodox *Makor Rishon-Hatzofe* editorialized: "[Mugniyah's assassination] is ... an act of justice on an international level."

Professor Eyal Zisser, the Chairman of the Department of Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University, wrote in *Yediot Aharonot*: "Nasrallah is now facing a dilemma. If he reacts, he -- and especially his Shi'ite supporters -- will be hit hard by Israel. If he does not react, then his image, which is already in trouble, will be damaged even more."

The conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post* editorialized: "Iran does not have to ever use a nuclear weapon, either directly or through proxies, for that weapon to have a profound impact on the level of terrorism in the world."

Block Quotes:

II. "Under Their Noses"

Senior Middle East affairs analyst Zvi Bar'el wrote on page one of the independent, left-leaning *Ha'aretz* (2/14): "If the Mugniyah assassination generates a mass outbreak in Lebanon, it might develop into a new civil war and create a tough front for Israel, since Lebanese chaos would likely spell the end of agreements reached following the Second Lebanon War and on the basis of Security Council Resolution 1701. In the most dangerous scenario, Hizbullah will respond to the assassination by deciding to go to war with Israel, and thereby place the Lebanese government in an impossible situation."

II. "Not Just 'Who' but Also 'Where'"

Washington correspondent Shmuel Rosner wrote in *Ha'aretz* (2/14): "State Department spokesman Sean McCormack gave vent to the Americans' joy at Mugniyah's demise when he said 'the world is a better place without this man in it.' Better -- but not necessarily safer.... On Wednesday fingers were pointed in three possible directions. If Israel did it -- the widespread assumption -- it would join the mysterious bombing of a Syrian facility last September in contributing substantially to improving Israel's security standing in Washington.... If America did it, it would come as a great surprise to most experts in Washington.... The third version has Syria as a potential suspect, perhaps as a means of signaling to the Americans that it wishes to resume talks and sever ties, at least partially, with the terror groups that have made Damascus home.... In any event, the fact that Mugniyah was killed on Syrian soil will go on the growing list of American charges against Syria. If the Syrians didn't know they were hosting one of America's greatest enemies, then Assad's rule is so weak that terror groups can establish a base there, compelling the U.S. to take preventive steps. If they knew, then they're in even bigger trouble."

III. "The Mindset and the Advantage"

Liberal columnist Ofer Shelach wrote on page one of the popular, pluralist *Maariv* (2/14): "Such an operation, to which Israel denies any connection, renews the sense that we have daring and resourceful organizations that can go any place and reach anyone. It renews our

faith that we are the pursuers and not the hunted.... On the other hand, think of this scenario: Israel does not react to the [July 2006] kidnapping immediately. A year and a half later, Imad Mughniyah meets his death in a mysterious explosion in Damascus. Nobody claims responsibility, but everyone knows why he died. This is elegant, smart, avoids acts that have no objective, and is so not Israel. We often talk about the Arab mentality, but the way we see everything as an ongoing attack, the way in which an operational opportunity leads us to thoughts about targets, achievements and costs, all these attest to an Israeli mentality that is often no less dangerous."

IV. "Blessed be the Almighty Who Rid Us of That Man"

Eytan Haber, veteran op-ed writer and assistant to the late prime minister Yitzhak Rabin, wrote on page one of the mass-circulation, pluralist *Yediot Aharonot* (2/14): "Believers amongst us will say: 'Blessed be [the Almighty] who rid us' [of Mughniyah]. The secular will quote a couple of lines by [the Israeli poet] Haim Hefer: 'This people would certainly like to say thank you/To the hidden fighters and the people of the secret and the enigma/And to add some affectionate word/ This people would certainly like to say thank you -- if it knew the address'.... However the motto of the day is: Beware. The Hizbullah organization has the habit of always saying the 'last word,' even when its leaders know they will take in more and more blows."

IV. "Making Justice on an International Level"

The nationalist, Orthodox *Makor Rishon-Hatzofe* editorialized (2/14): "Not only is the mysterious blast in which Imad Mughniyah found his death in Damascus an act in the war against terror. It is also an act of justice on an international level. The status of the international justice system could be exemplified by a comment that Quartet envoy Tony Blair made to [Israeli Internal Security] Minister around a week ago. Blair ... expressed his stupefaction at the fact that ... Dichter may not enter Britain out of concern that he will be arrested and put to trial for his involvement in the war on terror.... [Conversely], Imad Mughniyah has been roaming the world for almost three decades.... The international justice system has not been able to provide Israel and the Jewish people proper protection.... It turns out that in the absence of international power to prosecute criminal terrorists and bring them to justice, there is only one way to take care of them -- by eliminating them, thus deterring their accomplices."

VI. "Hizbullah Without Confidence"

Professor Eyal Zisser, the Chairman of the Department of Middle Eastern History at Tel Aviv University, wrote in *Yediot Aharonot* (2/14): "Nasrallah is now facing a dilemma. If he reacts, he -- and especially his Shi'ite supporters -- will be hit hard by Israel. If he does not react, then his image, which is already in trouble, will be damaged even more. In the past Nasrallah could rely on the support and advice of Mughniyah when times were difficult, but the latter is no longer with him. Nasrallah was battered and hurt Wednesday, but Nasrallah and his organization, like the masses of Shi'ite Muslims who support him, is not going anywhere. The organization still enjoys wide support and its military force is impressive. When the time comes he will try to punish Israel for the assassination of Mughniyah.... But the lesson of Mughniyah's killing is clear. Hassan Nasrallah is not omnipotent, nor is his organization. He is vulnerable and is on the defensive against his enemies and rivals. Anyone who followed the reactions inside and outside Lebanon -- some of them rejoicing at Hizbullah's misfortune -- can easily see that Israel is not Hizbullah's only enemy, and not necessarily the most dangerous one."

VII. "Death of a Terrorist"

The conservative, independent *Jerusalem Post* editorialized (2/14): "The death of Mughniyah ... should refocus attention on the danger posed by his real masters in Tehran. Every time the world contemplates a nuclear Iran, it must also contemplate the possibility that Mughniyah's successors will be tasked with using that weapon in a way that bears no obvious fingerprints leading back to Iran, presents no clear address for retaliation, and therefore leaves the entire deterrence model in shambles. But Iran does not

have to ever use a nuclear weapon, either directly or through proxies, for that weapon to have a profound impact on the level of terrorism in the world. If Iran goes nuclear, the mullahs will be able to greatly ramp up their support for the entire jihadi axis, including Hamas, Hizbullah, and al-Qaida, while enjoying substantial immunity from Western retaliation. This Iranian freedom of action could quickly change the face of the region, substantially raise the price of oil and otherwise pummel Western economies, and destroy any prospects for Arab-Israeli peace."

JONES